COVENANT METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Application to Become a Teaching Church

Covenant Metropolitan Community Church is a 15 year old, stable, 128 member, culturally diverse church in a university-centered city, where a variety of ministerial experiences are available for someone working to become UFMCC clergy.

In 1994 and 1995, Covenant raised over $73,000 to place a down payment on a $225,000 church building and to buy a $10,000 piano. The congregation is dedicated, able, and willing to support those things it believes in. It believes that it is already operating as a teaching church and is willing to support that concept through its members and friends.

SUPERVISING PASTOR: The pastor of Covenant MCC is Rev. Marge Ragona, a pastor with a long history as a teaching pastor at First MCC in Atlanta, at Covenant, and at other churches where she has pastored. Rev. Ragona has taught Introduction to the Bible for Samaritan for nearly 20 years, and has taught "Our Story, Too" and other Samaritan classes, as well. Her background prior to coming to UFMCC was in teaching and she holds a Master's degree in Education from Tulane University. Additionally, she holds the Master of Theological Studies from Springhill College in Mobile, and has had two years of a Master of Divinity program at Boston University. It is her intent to take the Supervising Clergy training at Spring District Conference. She is currently supervising two clergy candidates and three persons in formation.

MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES: Covenant has two worship services in Birmingham, a parish extension in Tuscaloosa, and a cell group in Lincoln (which draws from the Lincoln, Gadsden, Anniston, Pell City, and Talladega areas). There would be a wide range of ministry experiences in preaching, teaching, and pastoral care afforded through these groups. Currently, clergy candidates are serving in Memphis (Greg Bullard, pastoral leader), Atlanta (Andy Mullins, church administrative assistant), and one person in formation serves in Tuscaloosa (Dr. Lee Rahe, worship coordinator). Additionally, Rev. Richard Barham (transfer/in formation) is serving as leader of the cell group in Lincoln. Student preachers and deacons currently preach two or three of four or five Sundays in Tuscaloosa, Dr. Rahe preaches the other two. There would be sufficient opportunities available for persons in formation to preach the evening service at Covenant or the Tuscaloosa service, allowing four or five students the ability to preach at least once a month, as well as there being time for lay preaching. Additionally, there are three Bible studies (Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, and Lincoln), a healing group (Birmingham), and other teaching opportunities available. The congregations are sizeable enough that students would have peer listening, pastoral care, and other teaching opportunities. Additionally, through cooperative programs with other gay organizations which meet at the church (GALAA, the youth coffee house, etc.) there would be opportunities for community involvement. There would be opportunities for students to work with very small, small, and midsize MCC church groups here in Birmingham, and an opportunity to visit a variety

of churches from small Orthodox groups to very large Episcopal, Presbyterian, Catholic and Baptist churches with whom we have contact.

We have established collaborative working relationships with pastors in other denominations, in churches where our students would feel welcome worshipping and becoming familiar with a variety of worship styles. Our 15th year celebration slogan is "Forging New Alliances" and we are seriously working toward that end. Because of the pastor's visual handicap, candidates or deacons/church members make hospital and home calls with the pastor.

DIVERSITY: Covenant's congregation is racially mixed. Currently, for example, while the pastor is an older white woman, the vice moderator of the Board is a 25 year old African-American male. There are Caucasian and African-American members of the church. There are currently no oriental or hispanic members of the congregation, but the congregation would welcome such. (Personal Note: The pastor's family includes orientals and hispanics.) The pastor has studied (at the university level), reads and is somewhat conversant in Spanish, French and Italian (with no opportunity to speak these for many years). The pastor grew up in a predominantly Jewish section of New York City and spent her high school years in a Jewish institution. She has done graduate work at Yeshiva University in New York. .

Additionally, the congregation's ages range from upper teens (two members) to persons in their seventies. We have children of gay parents and parents of gay members attending our church who are members in their own right. In addition to parents and children, we have one other heterosexual member (female) and an occasional heterosexual attender (male). We have at least one transgendered person.

Members of the congregation are from most Protestant groups ranging from pentecostal to evangelical and liturgical. Approximately 10% of the congregation is made up people who identify as Catholic. We have one person of Jewish/Christian origin in the congregation. The morning worship service is mid-high Methodist and somewhat formal, while the evening service tends to be Baptist/Evangelical in style, thus allowing for some diversity of worship styles. From time to time our excellent choir presents cantatas, and a drama group presents dramatic readings or plays/pageants as part of the worship services.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES: Birmingham is a city with a variety of hospitals and a major university. Tuscaloosa has a major university. A variety of employment opportunities is present. Computer knowledge is required of almost any candidate, since most of the opportunities presented require computer literacy, but there are all kinds of employment possibilities present. Currently, those who are candidates or in formation work as a professor, in data processing, as a bill collector, as a technical writer, and one is actively seeking employment (having been a pastor for seven years). There are opportunities in retail, management, and hospital work of many types. The congregation is varied enough that it would help the candidates find work in a variety of fields. There is work for someone willing to work, although some of it might be student level and somewhat underpaid. Temporary housing could be provided with church members if the

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need arose, and some financial assistance is available through our church's Community Assistance Fund in emergencies ($300 lifetime limit). It is hoped that the candidates would be as self-supporting as the members are.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES: Educational opportunities abound at both Birmingham and Tuscaloosa at both undergraduate and graduate level. A student clergy scholarship program exists at Covenant, but is not funded this calendar year. It could be funded in the future. The church has, in the past, funded an assistant pastor position, and is currently being asked to consider that for one person in formation. (This has not passed the Board as yet, and finances are still somewhat tight, as we have only once achieved our current budget with the new building due to freezes and ice storms limiting our worship services to three each month in January and February).

SCREENING/LIABILITY: The church would ensure the screening of candidates. The church currently has liability insurance for the pastor, other church employees and staff. An ongoing program of liability awareness is carried on by the church for all leadership (clergy, those in formation, deacons, and teachers). Persons have been removed from service who were deemed to be liability risks.

SUPPORT/EVALUATION: The candidates for clergy meet monthly with the staff and deacons, have monthly individual meetings and weekly telephone updates with the pastor and are supported by the Board of Directors, who have a role in encouraging the candidates to pursue their programs and work in the church.

Candidates are made aware of the Fellowship's evaluation process and are encouraged to follow that process throughout their period of candidacy. Sermons are critiqued and sermon delivery styles are commented upon. Candidates have an opportunity to discuss peer listening sessions, pastoral care, and education experiences. They are encouraged to attend the Deacon training program and benefit from the discussions with the deacons concerning the care of the congregation. All candidates have many opportunities to be communion servers, communion consecrators, and act as prayer intercessors in the worship services. People are asked to self-evaluate their performance in these areas. A constant program of informal evaluation and self-evaluation is encouraged.

Whenever possible, as a candidate is willing, the person serves on the diaconal staff for a period of time. This enables the person to "do ministry" as a layperson, and discover whether indeed one is called to the ministry of the laity or the ministry of the clergy. Many people find that they can adequately minister as lay people, without becoming clergy, and many discover that they are not prepared to invest the time and effort either of these ministries would require.

Proposal

1. Number of Candidates:
It is believed that Covenant could actively train three candidates at any one time.

We currently have three persons in formation and have two candidates in the field who have been through our program and are employed by churches in either pastoral or administrative functions. The two clergy candidates still have supervisory sessions with the pastor and/or preach at Covenent as part of their programs, even though they are actively working with other churches. The three persons currently in formation have a variety of backgrounds. One is a professor at the University of Alabama. Because he holds a doctorate, and is employed by the University, he has the availability of additional course work at the University as well as his Samaritan studies. One candidate is a technical writer with a Master's degree in fine art. He is currently enrolled at Samaritan. The third candidate has course work toward the Master of Divinity, has been employed as a pastor for seven years, and has taken some Samaritan work. He is considered a candidate for transfer, but this must be worked out with the Board of Ordained Ministry.

As the candidates achieve ordination (expected within one year) and at least one in formation moves to candidate status, this would make room for an additional person in formation. While Covenant has not sought persons to train with us, people seeking ministry in MCC have sought Covenant as a training church.

2. Training Program:

a. All persons in formation are expected to participate in our Deacon Training Program. This is not only of value to Covenant, but also gives the person in formation a model training program that they can follow and/or build upon in their own pastorate.

b. Those in formation are expected to take classes, either at the University level or at Samaritan. Both the University of Alabama and the University of Alabama at Birmingham have programs in religious studies, as does Birmingham Southern. Regretfully, Beeson School of Divinity has turned down an MCC student on the basis of his homosexuality. One member of the church is enrolled in the U of A religious study program at this time.

c. Those in formation are expected to preach Sunday evenings and at Tuscaloosa. Written sermons and/or outlines are expected by the pastor. The sermons will be critiqued for inclusivity, liberation themes, exegesis and historical accuracy, etc., as well as delivery.

d. Those in formation are expected to attend Bible study and/or the healing group at Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, or Lincoln. They are expected to do a share of the teaching for these groups on a fairly regular basis, and to act as respite for the regular teachers. They will teach under supervision during some part of the time at Covenant.

d. They are expected to take part in AIDS Care Team programs, either as a member of a team or as liaison to a team, particularly for pastoral care of the "friend" whom the care team is serving.

e. They are to meet with the pastor at least once monthly, and to check in with the pastor by telephone weekly to discuss evaluation, difficulties, or pastoral care topics.

Covenant will:

1. In whatever way possible, integrate the person in formation into church life and community life, especially through small groups (Bible studies, healing groups, cell groups). The person will be encouraged to attend church suppers and luncheons, eat with

the group after church (an ongoing activity), join workgroups at the church, and otherwise take part in community life.

2. Provide liability insurance to cover the person through our current church insurance which includes liability insurance.

3. Ensure the required screening of the candidate.

4.. Ensure that its pastor has all training available and approved through the Fellowship or District.

5. Hold regularly scheduled deacon and staff meetings at which the candidate can relate to other staff, share experiences, successes, and difficulties; and receive adequate support for his/her ministry.

6. Hold monthly evaluation meetings with the candidate/person in formation, to evaluate preaching, worship participation, pastoral care, teaching, and other aspects of ministry.

6. Continue to be evaluated annually by the district.

7. Abide by the District's decisions as to the number of candidates or persons in formation the church can adequately train at any one time.

9. In emergencies, housing will be sought among church members should the candidate require same; also, funds from the community assistance fund will be allocated in emergencies for power, heat, food, etc. (Lifetime limit per church policies is $300.00.)

10. Church members will help the candidate with finding employment, if needed and if possible. It is felt that the candidate must be sufficiently self motivated to find employment, housing, etc., recognizing that if the candidate enters UFMCC ministry, he/she will have to have these skills and abilities, and some job training outside of ministry, to enable the person to pastor small and struggling churches where the pastor may need to be bivocational.

The Candidate will:

1. Preach on scheduled Sundays at either Birmingham or Tuscaloosa. (A monthly schedule is agreed to two months in advance by the staff and deacons.)

2. Attend or teach Bible study, cell group, or healing group as needed.

3. Serve on the diaconal staff for at least one year during training.

4. Serve on a care team.

5. Be full-time employed or if a student, part-time employed sufficiently to meet daily living needs.

6. Attend deacon and staff meetings.

7. Attend monthly conferences with the pastor.

8. Insofar as possible, attend Board meetings.

9. Make weekly telephone or in person contact with the pastor to discuss current problems, evaluations, or needs.

10. Abide by Fellowship standards regarding sexual conduct and be aware of the liabilities inherent in not abiding by those standards; transgression *is* reason for dismissal from the program.

11. Unless providentially hindered, the person will attend at least 5 worship services a month, divided between morning and evening worship, in order to serve as a communion consecrator, communion server, or intercessor. Other worship attendance is optional and encouraged.

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6. Continue to be evaluated annually by the district.

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THE GULF LOWER ATLANTIC DISTRICT
of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches
1379 Tullie Road • Atlanta, GA 30329
(404) 325-1372
The Rev. Jay Neely, District Coordinator

February 13, 1996

The Pastor and Board of Directors:

When the General Conference in July 1995 approved a new process to credential UFMCC clergy, it embraced the "Teaching Church" as a key component. As directed by General Conference and according to the approved guidelines the District Committee of The Gulf Lower Atlantic District will be considering appointments for "Teaching Churches". The future of our denomination, the integrity of our ministry, depends in large part on how we prepare leadership for the future. This new process presents new challenges and makes greater demands on our time and resources. The result will be our ability to provide for spiritual leadership of an exacting standard in increasing numbers.

At this time we want to encourage GLAD churches considering the responsibility of a "Teaching Church", to provide us with a proposal as to how they would meet the requirements of a "Teaching Church".

Criteria for becoming a Teaching Church:

(From The UFMCC Credentialing Process July, 1995 as amended))

1) *They must be strong, stable, diverse congregations willing to commit resources to training clergy.*
2) *They must be approved by the District according to the standards established in that District.*
3) *They must have a District approved "Supervising Clergy" on staff.*
4) *They must reflect the multi-faceted diversity of the denomination.*
5) *They must be able to provide a wide range of ministry experience.*
6) *They should be able to assist the Candidate with funding, housing, and employment if necessary.*
7) *They must be able to ensure the required screening of candidates.*

Additionally, the Gulf Lower Atlantic District will also expect the following:

1) *Each Teaching Church will be reviewed at least annually by the District Committee/ or committee appointed for this purpose reporting to the District Committee,*
2) *The District Committee, in consultation with the Supervising Clergy and local Board of Directors, will determine the number of Clergy Candidates the Teaching Church may work with during the same time frame.*
3) *The Teaching Church will have a pre-approved program for providing experiential endeavors. This will include the opportunity for a candidate to preach at least once a month. and, to participate fully in the ministry of the congregation during their candidacy period. The experience should include exposure to the full range of Pastoral responsibilities.*
4) *The teaching church will make every effort to integrate the candidate into church life and community life during the period of the candidacy.*
5) *The Teaching Church must have sufficient liability insurance to cover the Clergy Candidate(s) and to cover the Board of Directors and the Supervising Clergy for decisions and recommendations made in connection with the operation and process of the teaching church..*
6) *Supervisor/Advisors will have approved training.*
7) *The Teaching Church will have a support committee (staff) which will have a role in the candidate's program.*
8) *As part of the candidacy program, there will be a process for evaluating the candidate.*

The ultimate success of a "Teaching Church" will depend on its investment of resources and its commitment to excellence in providing the clergy candidate with a wide variety of developmental experiences. There are many diverse worship experiences available within GLAD. Those churches who feel they meet the qualifications and wish to become a "Teaching Church" are encouraged to use creative and innovative ways to

utilize this diversity to the benefit of the clergy candidate. Becoming a "Teaching Church" does not preclude the use of resources and diversity found in other churches within the region. If you believe this would enhance the experience that your church could provide, please describe how this would be coordinated with other churches. The District Committee is particularly interested in how prospective teaching churches might provide a candidate with exposure to the large-church, medium-church, and small-church worship experience.

Proposals will be accepted by the District Committee through April 15, 1996. Please mail six (6) copies of your proposal to the District Coordinator. We thank you for your continued efforts as we minister together to God' s people in the Gulf Lower Atlantic District.

For the District Committee,

The Reverend Jay Neely

Copy: The GLAD Committee
The GLAD Board of Ordained Ministry